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ABSTRACT

Examining the effects of spelling tests on spelling achievement, a study compared two methods of spelling evaluation: (1) the dictated word-sentence-word method, requiring students to write only the spelling words; and (2) the dictated-sentence method, requiring students to write entire sentences containing the spelling words. Two fourth-grade classes (41 students) in a midwest community were taught 20 new spelling words per week from the same commercial series for an entire school year. Both groups also participated in identical spelling activities and study assignments throughout the year. The two groups varied only with respect to the methods of administering the weekly spelling test. Two pretest measures of spelling ability were used--the spelling scores from the Science Research Associates (SRA) achievement test, and a 40-word spelling test developed specifically for this study. The posttest consisted of 20 words randomly selected from the 720-word spelling list for the year, and 20 words randomly selected from the fourth-grade section of the vocabulary list developed by the State Department of Education in Nebraska. Findings indicated that students achieved higher scores on the dictated word-sentence-word method than on the dictated-sentence method. (Five references are appended.) (MM)

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Abstract

This study examined spelling achievement from two different methods for presenting words on weekly spelling tests. The dictated word-sentence-word method required students to write spelling words singly while the dictated-sentence method required students to write entire sentences. Findings indicate that students achieve higher on the dictated word-sentence-word method than on the dictated-sentence method.

A Comparison of Two Approaches for Testing Spelling in Elementary Grades

Teachers routinely rely on spelling tests to determine whether students have the ability to spell words correctly. While teachers may not think of the test as a teaching mechanism, some recent authors clearly do. In this context, one common testing method, the dictated word-sentence-word method, has recently been called into question. Kottmeyer and Claus (1980) in their spelling series argue that the dictated-sentence method does more than just produce effective spellers on weekly tests, but develops a spelling power in students that allows them to become discriminating observers of words whenever they see them. Significant emphasis is placed on relating spelling skills to other writing skills. It is implied that their method will improve spelling transfer. That is, students who learn by the dictated-sentence method are expected to not only learn the words directly taught, but also to spell more words correctly in general.

Because the authors provided no empirical evidence to support their claims, and a search of the literature revealed no studies which have investigated this topic, two elementary teachers solicited assistance from the local university in testing the merit of the authors' claim. The question they posed for investigation was, "Will students spell more words corerctly if the dictated-sentence method of testing students instead of the

dictated word-sentence-word method is used for testing students over their weekly spelling word list?" A pre-post control group design was used to investigate the question (Campbell and Stanley, 1963).

METHOD

Data for the study was gathered from two intact fourth-grade classrooms of an elementary school located in a midwest community of approximately 10,000 population. Throughout the school year both groups were taught 20 new spelling words per week from the same commercial series (Kottmeyer and Claus, 1980). Both groups also participated in identical spelling activities and study assignments throughout the year. To insure the same prescribed routine for the two classes, they were closely monitored throughout the thirty-two week experimental period. As a result the two groups varied only with respect to the methods of administering the weekly spelling test.

In the dictated-sentence method (n=22) the teacher administered each test by reading orally the ten sentences suggested in the teacher's manual which accompanied the spelling series. Each sentence contained approximately ten words, consisting of common words such as the, a, an and several review words: and one or more words from the weekly word list. The teacher read (dictated) each sentence twice and students were required to write each sentence in its entirety.

The dictated word-sentence-word method was administered in

the following manner: The teacher first pronounced a word to be spelled, then read orally that word in a sentence to emphasize its meaning, and finally pronounced the word one more time before pronouncing the next word from the twenty-word spelling text. The students (n=19) in this class wrote only words pronounced singly from the teacher's spelling list and did not write entire sentences.

For both classes a student's score on the test was achieved by counting the total number of the 20 "weekly words" which were spelled correctly. In the dictated-sentence method words which were spelled incorrectly but were not from the current weekly word list did not affect the student's spelling scores.

Two pretest measures of spelling ability were used. Data for one, students spelling scores from the language arts subtest of the SRA achievement test, level C, Form 1 for grade 2-3 (SEA, 1978) taken in April of the previous year, were obtained from student record files. The other was a 40 word spelling test which was developed by the investigators and served as both a pretest and a posttest.

In order to provide a score which could reflect both words directly taught and spelling transfer to similar words not directly taught, 20 words were randomly selected from the 720 spelling list for the year and the remaining 20 words were randomly selected from the fourth-grade section of the N-AEEIS vocabulary list developed by the State Department of Education in

Nebraska (Harlan, 1977). This test was administered to students by the dictated word-sentence-word method in early September and again in late May.

Posttest scores were analyzed via an analysis of covariance procedure (SAS, 1979) to detect a difference in posttest means for the two groups. Both pretests were used as covariates in order to control for differences which may have existed in spelling abilities between the two groups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed a significant difference between the posttest group means ($F = 4.16$, $p < .05$) with the dictated word-sentence-word method having a higher adjusted mean (28.04) than the dictated-sentence method (25.53).

Two things are noteworthy about this difference: a) the difference is in the direction opposite that anticipated by advocates of the dictated-sentence method, and b) the difference, though statistically significant, is small and probably of little practical import. The investigators believe that a good speller is one who can spell correctly on a weekly test but who can also spell those same words correctly the following week and into the future. Spelling is also used in the writing process and students need to be able to spell words correctly when creating sentences and paragraphs. It is, therefore, essential that elementary teachers emphasize weekly spelling achievement but also emphasize spelling during writing periods throughout the

school day.

In coming to a conclusion regarding which approach to follow when administering weekly spelling tests, teachers need to determine spelling goals for their students. "Are you only concerned about weekly spelling test scores?" "Are you concerned about the meaning of words in the context of sentence structure?" "Are you concerned about transferability of spelling consciousness to other areas of the curriculum?" These questions must be answered in building an effective spelling program.

For spelling of words directly taught plus spelling transfer to words of similar difficulty, this study's results indicate the dictated word-sentence-word method of spelling test administration as slightly superior. This suggests it is the method of choice if the goal of the spelling program is focused only on the number of words correctly spelled. Whether the dictated-sentence method is superior in other regards such as teaching students the meaning of words is a claim which remains to be tested.

Spelling is an essential part of the elementary school curriculum. When studying one's spelling curriculum it is essential to analyze the properties of the spelling words in the curriculum, understand the charactertistics of the spellers and determine the methods being followed in spelling instruction. Whenever possible such decisions should be based on empirical evidence, not just the claim of authors. This study adds one

more piece of knowledge to the area of methods of spelling instruction.

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